

# GILBERT OF MORAY, BISHOP OF CAITHNESS

BY REV. ARCHIBALD B. SCOTT, B.D.

## I

IN this year, 1924, the seven hundredth anniversary of the transportation and founding of the Cathedral of Caithness<sup>1</sup> at Dornoch is being celebrated. This has naturally attracted renewed attention to Gilbert, the founder and reorganiser of the diocese, and to the time in which he lived.

Gilbert of Moray, saint, social worker, and ecclesiastic, was one of the most outstanding men in the unreformed Church in Scotland. He was the first, and the last, of the mediæval Scots to be canonised. His name does not appear in some of the Roman and British Calendars, but it is carefully entered in Laud's Calendar, A.D. 1637. Apparently the people had recognised their bishop as a saint during his life-time. Later some formal ecclesiastical approval had been given, because, after his death, the Cathedral Church at Dornoch was rededicated "to S. Mary and S. Gilbert."<sup>2</sup>

Gilbert was born towards the end of the twelfth century, and was successively monk of Melrose, abbot of Glenluce, archdeacon of Moray, and bishop of Caithness. In, or about, the year 1211, Hugo Freskyn of Moray gave him a title to Skelbo and to other lands, and in the deed he is styled, "Master Gilbert, archdeacon of Morray." Shaw would make him a brother<sup>3</sup> of this Hugo; but authorities are divided as to the exact relationship.

<sup>1</sup> A characteristically excellent account of the cathedral by W. Douglas Simpson, M.A., with plans, is given in *Proceedings of the Soc. of Antiquaries of Scotland*, Vol. X, Fifth Series, 1923-24, pp. 227-238, and a further very careful study is in the *Aberdeen University Review*, July 1924. Attention is specially directed to Simpson's account of the influences that led to the extension of the Roman Church into Caithness from Moray, because they are frequently misunderstood.

<sup>2</sup> Gilbert's own words in the *Constitution* are "dedicated to the above-mentioned Mother of God." Sir Robert Gordon in 1630 varies this to "in honor of the conception of our Ladye."

<sup>3</sup> *History of Moray*, p. 27. Gilbert had a brother Richard, who was slain at the battle of Embo. Gordon calls Richard "servant" of William, Hugo's son. If he had been William's uncle, surely it would have been so stated.

He was nominated locally to the bishopric of Caithness in A.D. 1222, although confirmation was not given from Rome until 1224.<sup>1</sup> He died at the castle<sup>2</sup> of Scrabster on 1st April 1245.<sup>3</sup> His day at Dornoch was celebrated on the first of April, and the Aberdeen Breviary adopts the local date.

## II

To understand Gilbert's work it is necessary to know something about the people, the district, and the country.

The dominant inhabitants of Caithness had been the Cattei(t).<sup>4</sup> They were Britons; or, as they were called later, Picts. According to their own legends, they were descended from the "Cruithnii," British tribes that occupied the east coast of Ireland. Early in the Christian era a detachment of them migrated from Inver-Boinne; and, using "Ile" as a base, they penetrated into, and occupied, parts of the western and northern mainland. They took peaceful control of the earlier British inhabitants. Their tribal name appears in the names of their chiefs—Cat-luan, Cat-molodar, Cat-machan.<sup>5</sup>

In Gilbert's time Caithness<sup>6</sup> had not recovered from the invasions of the Norse vikings. These barbarians had driven the Cattei into the valleys of the interior: such as were allowed to remain on the coast were serfs to the Norsemen. Up to the thirteenth century Norse authority still held in Caithness. In 1187 William the Lion, king of Scots, made his power felt as far north as the Kyle of Sutherland.<sup>7</sup> The same king came to Moray in 1214, and there negotiated a treaty with John, Earl of Orkney and Caithness, and received his daughter as a hostage for her father's fidelity. The Earl was slain at Thurso by Norse malcontents in 1231.<sup>8</sup>

It was the policy of William the Lion and Alexander II. to encourage southerners friendly to the Scotic ruling caste to penetrate the northern districts, in order to extend the authority of the king of Scots. These southerners took two methods to secure their end. They accepted some small holding on condition of furnishing military service to the

<sup>1</sup> See Theiner, 52.

<sup>2</sup> Wrongly called "palace" by recent writers. It was a stronghold.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon's date, and to be preferred to "1243" of the *Icelandic Annals*. Gordon had access to documents now lost.

<sup>4</sup> The full plural is *Catteit* for *Cattiaid*.

<sup>5</sup> See MS. (R.I.A., Dublin) *Book of Ballimote* "Do Cruithneachaib incipit."

<sup>6</sup> "Caithness" meant the territory from the north Atlantic coast to the Kyle of Sutherland. "Sutherland" is simply the southern territory of the *Cattei*.

<sup>7</sup> Campaign against MacWilliam, *Chron. Mel.*, 1187.

<sup>8</sup> *Eirspenill's Saga*, c. 173.

king ; that is, they provided military to deal with the local opponents of the Crown. They also took every opportunity of marrying the daughters of local chiefs, and claiming lordship on behalf of their children. This is how various Norman military adventurers came to be connected with northern territories at this period.

When Norse influence began to be bred out by the physical strength and antipathy of the Celtic women, or to be elbowed out by the pressure of Celtic reaction taking advantage of the failure of support to the Norse from Norway, the men of Moray appeared, and took a keen part in reorganising the Celts of Caithness. In this connection it ought to be remembered that Moray had been one of the petty states within the Pictish Federation ; and that its chiefs had been eligible for the sovereignty. The territory of the clans of Moray had extended from the Deveron along the south side of the Firth, west to the town of Inverness, and north into Easter Ross.

Before and during Gilbert's time the people of Caithness began to group themselves into new and artificial clans—artificial in the sense that the leaders and their personal guard were outsiders, and of different blood from the people. The people bearing the name "Sutherland" were the survivors of the Pictish *Cattei* ; but the chiefs who rallied and reorganised them were Morayshire men with a Norman taint in their blood, as their names Gilbert,<sup>1</sup> William, etc., indicate. The Murrays, as separately organised by Gilbert, were men from the mass of the Morayshire Picts, and were used as a garrison. The Mackays were descendants of the famous British or Pictish clan *Morgan*. They came to Caithness from the south side of the Firth. They had been driven into the north by the Romans during the expulsions from Strathclyde and North Wales. The section of clan *Morgan* that had found its way to what is now Buchan were separately organised under their own *toisech*<sup>2</sup> as late as the eleventh and twelfth centuries. From there the Mackays of Clan *Morgan* spread into Moray and Ross, and crossed the Firth to Caithness. They still represent the purest British stock and blood in Sutherland, considered as a family. The MacNicols of the west were a mixture of Picts and Norse, and their leaders were of Norse stock ; through them the MacLeods came into the west, and they too had Norse chiefs, although the clan was a mixture of Norse, Picts, and Gael. The Gilchrists and Duncans, still represented among the crofting families,

<sup>1</sup> This name was equated with *Gillebryde* at times.

<sup>2</sup> See Fol. 3, II, 8 ; and Fol. 5, VI, 10 ; MS. *Book of Deer*, Margin. Note also congeall mc (Aed) Éda, Fol. 3, II, 1. Aed, in its various forms, has been "a Morgan-Mackay name since before the Morgans left Wales in the Roman period. Aed, in the later period, became Y, I, Huy." The Gaelic form is seen in the last syllable of " Mackay," *MacAoidh*.

came in about this time from Angus. Keiths, Inneses, and Dunbars crossed the Firth at various periods. The Gunns, by whom the Murray earls of Sutherland used to overawe the natives, and to police the frontier, came into existence as an organised family in Gilbert's life-time. The Cheynes, Oliphants, Mowats, St. Clairs, and other Normanised families came to Caithness after Gilbert's day. The three former families crossed from the south side of the Firth, and the last came to Caithness by way of Orkney from the Lowlands.

In justice to the workers of the ancient Celtic Church, whose names still survive attached to their Church sites throughout Caithness, it should be said, with reference to Gilbert, "other men laboured and he entered into their labours." The first church in Dornoch was founded by S. Finbar (whose name was shortened to *Find*, *Finnian*, *-nbar* and *Barr*), and he was a pupil and master at S. Ninian's, Candida Casa, now Whithorn, Galloway. The old name of one of the very oldest places in Dornoch attests this; the Churchyard was always known as "Cladh-(F)inbar." S. Finbar conducted his northern mission in what is now Scotland before A.D. 540—the year in which he founded Maghble. His main object in the north was no doubt to visit the stations founded by S. Ninian before A.D. 432 at S. Ninian's, Fearn of Edderton; S. Ninian's, Navidale; and S. Ninian's, Wick. Besides Dornoch,<sup>1</sup> S. Finbar founded Seipel 'nbar at Mid Gany; his name was associated with one of the Church sites in Berriedale; and the ancient Church at Ballachly of Dunbeath was probably his, because, to the north of this chapel there is a rising-ground called Cnoc-(Fh)innian. The Moray tradition preserved in the *Martyrology of Aberdeen* confirms that Finbar ("Fimbarr") was the founder of Dornoch, and distinguishes between him and the saint of Cork. There is also the negative evidence that S. Barr of Cork<sup>2</sup> was a hermit, was not a missionary Ab and bishop, and never was in what is now Scotland. The Christian religion had been taught in Caithness over 750 years before Gilbert's time by the missionaries of the Celtic Church, and that Celtic Church was still represented at Dornoch when he came to it; in the catalogue attached to the *Chronicle of Henry of Silgrave*, c. 1270, the religious house at the seat of the Bishop of Caithness is given as occupied by Cele Dé, who were the survivors of the ancient

<sup>1</sup> S. Finbar's *muinntir* covered the ground to the east of the present cathedral, and the dry-stone foundations of cells were uncovered during the laying of the foundation of the old school extension. The churchyard, the *Cladh-Fhinbar*, extended out into what is now the burgh streets. The church that represented the Church of S. Finbar's *muinntir* was not demolished until shortly before 1630; *Gen. of the Earls*, Gordon, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> A late scribe among the monks of Fearn is responsible for confusing S. Finbar of Maghble with S. Barr, Cork; although in Bishop Elphinstone's time the name and identity of S. Finbar was preserved in both Moray and Aberdeen.

Celtic Church. These Cele Dé continued throughout Gilbert's episcopate, and probably the hope that he would win them over as fellow-workers for the Roman Church was one motive that moved him to select Dornoch as his episcopal seat. The Cele Dé probably conformed to the Roman Church under pressure from the Murrays, A.D. 1271; because in that year Sir Patrick Murray founded a house for the Trinitarian or "Cruced" Friars in Dornoch, and another at Cromarty.

### III

When Gilbert of Moray was a youth he had been sent to the Cistercian Abbey of Melrose<sup>1</sup> to be educated,<sup>2</sup> and he became a monk there. He was apparently one of a detachment of monks sent to staff the Abbey of Glenluce, Wigton, founded in 1190 by Roland of Galloway. He became Abbot of Glenluce himself shortly afterwards. In A.D. 1203 he was made Archdeacon of Moray; and in this position he was also minister of Forres. At this time the seat of the Bishop of Moray was at Spynie, and the Bishop was Bricius of Douglas, who had been Prior of Lesmahago.<sup>3</sup>

Gilbert was a Cistercian monk, and through this connection Cistercian influence was introduced into Caithness. It was to the Cistercian Abbey of Kinloss that the King of Scots compelled William, Earl of Sutherland, to hand over the care of the Chapel, Hospital, and Ferry-house of S. John Baptist at Helmsdale on May 21, 1362, because he could not let travellers rest and cross the river Illidh without relieving them of their money. This chapel was formerly called Kil-Iain. Also, when Gilbert was at Glenluce, beside Candida Casa, he would learn much about the ancient work carried on in the North from S. Ninian's time;<sup>4</sup> and would hear of the efforts that Candida Casa was making, at the moment, to re-open communications there.

Although Gilbert was a monk, and Archdeacon of Moray, it was as

<sup>1</sup> Founded on the site of a Celtic house in 1136 by David I.

<sup>2</sup> Due probably to the proximity of Kinloss, another Cistercian house, founded 1150 by David I.

<sup>3</sup> Cell of Kelso. *Tyronenses*. Tyron, founded in 1109 by S. Bernard, Abbot of S. Cyprian's in *Poictou*.

<sup>4</sup> The ancient Celtic monastery at S. Ninian's, Fearn of Edderton, was refounded by the monks of Candida Casa as a Roman house in 1227—five years after Gilbert became bishop.

It is worth noting that a place called "Ferne-buchlyn," still unidentified, was in Gilbert's grant. Could this have been Fearn of Edderton, granted by Farquhar of Ross? Why did they remove to *Nova Farina* in 1238 if Ferquhar's right to make the grant was good? It was the men from Gilbert's lands that disputed Ferquhar's right to the lands on the south side of the Kyle.

a landlord that he first settled in Sutherland. At this time the Celtic land belonged to the tribesmen. Chiefs were only military leaders, not landlords. Nevertheless, in A.D. 1211, Hugo of Moray granted to Master Gilbert, Archdeacon of Moray, all his lands of Skelbo, Fernebuchlyn, Invershin, and the land westward between there and the marches of Ross, and this grant was confirmed by his son William "of Sutherland" about 1214. How Hugo of Moray got authority to grant the tribesmen's lands, or how he held those he possessed, is not clear. Apparently he was taking advantage of the tribal disorganisation caused by the Norse invasions.

There was, however, a difference between the use that Gilbert made of the land and that made of it by Hugo and his descendants. Gilbert used it to benefit the people, and to restore prosperity to the province: Hugo and his descendants used it to enrich the ruling caste, and to keep the people in their control. Under the new secular landlords the serfdom instituted by the Norse foreigners was continued, and men not on military service were compelled to give the earls a stated amount of unpaid labour each week.<sup>1</sup> Men strove to become tenants of the Church because they were free.

The Cistercians, to whom Gilbert belonged, had always been keen farmers. Wherever they came, they encouraged cultivation and stock-rearing with Cistercian zeal. Gilbert revived cultivation and encouraged pastoral farming. He built the castle of Skelbo, fortified it, guarded his lands, and protected his tenants by the power of the sword, like a southern baron.

In A.D. 1222 he became bishop-designate of Caithness, which had been founded as a Roman See about A.D. 1146, and whose Cathedral had been the "High Kirk" at Halkirk. The first bishop was Andrew, 1146-1185, monk of Dunfermline, who never took up residence. The second bishop, John, 1185-1213, was mutilated and half-blinded in A.D. 1201 by Harald Maddadson, Norse Earl of Caithness. The third bishop, Adam of Carlisle, Abbot of Melrose, was murdered by burning at Halkirk.<sup>2</sup> In the time of this bishop a tax was wont to be collected from all butter made in the diocese. A span of butter for every twenty cows had usually been taken, but the bishop wished to exact the same for every ten. This the Norse farmers and their Celtic serf-labourers refused to pay. The bishop insisted, and so provoked a riot, which compelled him to seek refuge in his own kitchen, where he was burned alive, A.D. 1222. Halkirk was apparently such an unsafe place for bishops that after Gilbert had been consecrated at York, two years later,

<sup>1</sup> The earls attempted to exact this unpaid labour as late as 1820.

<sup>2</sup> *The Chronicle of Melrose* did not allow this deed to be forgotten. See under 1222.

he settled at Dornoch, on his own land, where he was protected by the Moray garrison at Skelbo.

The Parish Church of Dornoch, up to this time, had been served by a single presbyter. Gilbert resolved to erect it into a Cathedral, and he organised a chapter of ten canons, on the model of Lincoln, the bishop to be supreme.<sup>1</sup> The dean had the Church of Clyne for his support, the precentor the Church of Creich, the chancellor the Church of Rogart, the treasurer the Church of Lairg, and the archdeacon the Churches of Bower and Watten. One of the canons had the Church of Orlig, another had Dunnet, and another had Canisbay, *i.e.* Canon's-bi. An honorary member of the Chapter was the Abbot of Scone,<sup>2</sup> who possessed the Church of Kildonan. The Abbot of Scone was not only a great ecclesiastic, but a powerful personality of the realm who was often in the king's council. Gilbert showed his wisdom in having a man of this type associated with the See, because it insured some protection against the rapacity of neighbouring landlords.

The connection between the bishopric and Kildonan and the Abbey of Scone was carefully fostered, because Alexander II, 1214-49, issued a letter to the officials in Moray and the south of Caithness, ordering them to protect the ship, crew, and cargo belonging to the Abbot and Convent of Scone from molestation during voyages to the North.

Gilbert's claim to be remembered rests on what he did to keep religion alive, and to preserve civilisation after both had been threatened with extinction by the Norse invaders. He encouraged the people to better their condition by resuming the cultivation of the land, and by continuing the rearing of the little black cattle and the small sturdy horses for which the district had been famous. There was a school at Dornoch, but what direct encouragement Gilbert gave to it is not quite clear: teaching had been given in the days of the Celtic Church. It is said that Gilbert translated the Psalms into Gaelic, but the statement does not rest on very good authority. What he probably did was to encourage the use of the Psalms in the native dialect as the *Cele Dé* had done. One important feature of Gilbert's episcopate was that he could speak to the people, and could teach them in their own native dialect of Celtic, which was not Irish Gaelic. That was more than most of the bishops in his time could do, because the Roman Church had

<sup>1</sup> In the *Constitution* Gilbert writes, "over whom the bishop as head shall have pre-eminence."

This provision was designed to keep the canons from following the practice of the *Cele Dé*, who claimed an equal voice with the bishop in a local council, over which, frequently, their dean presided.

<sup>2</sup> He served Kildonan by a Vicar. The right of the Abbey of Scone to the lands and fishings which belonged to S. Donnan's Church was derived from Earl Harald before Gilbert's time.

up to that period usually appointed Englishmen and foreigners to the bishoprics.

The deplorable state to which education fell at the end of the thirteenth century, after Gilbert's death, is seen from the fact that, after 1270 Nicolas, Abbot of Scone, was appointed bishop by the Chapter; but Gregory X, bishop of Rome, annulled the election,<sup>1</sup> because Nicolas could neither read nor write.

Gilbert was greatly trusted at Rome. He was put on three commissions to judge, and dispose of, elections to bishoprics, and on a fourth, A.D. 1225, to deal with the complaint of a dispossessed cleric.

He made his will in A.D. 1242, and that will was still extant<sup>2</sup> among the papers of the bishopric in A.D. 1630. After the latter date, it conveniently disappeared, because it was being used to challenge the landlords who had been, and were still, helping themselves to the properties of the churches in the diocese.

Perhaps the simplest tribute to Gilbert is furnished by the preface to the *Constitution* of his Chapter: "Gilbert, by divine mercy, bishop of Caithness, to all Christ's faithful (people) who may see or hear this document, Greeting in the Lord. Whereas in the days preceding our Ministry in the Cathedral Church, there used to be, both on account of the poverty of the place, and on account of repeated warfare, only a single presbyter ministering to God: we for the honour of our Lord Jesus Christ and of his most blessed Mother, Mary, and of all the Saints,<sup>3</sup> desiring to amplify the Divine Service in the same; after the earnest discussion and advice of wise men having been procured on this matter, have decreed to build the Cathedral Church (itself) at our own expense, and, as far as our poverty will allow, to erect the same as a Conventual (Church) dedicated to the above-mentioned Mother of God."

The man who thus wrote and designed, and fulfilled his designs, was a sincere worker, according to his light, spending liberally what had been given to him for the honour of God and the welfare of the people of Caithness. He died, as has been noted, at the Castle of Scrabster, in the extreme north of the diocese, a sign in itself of the extent of "Gilbert's peace."

<sup>1</sup> Papal Registers, 1198-1304 (Bliss, 1, 446).

<sup>2</sup> Gordon, *Genealogy of the Earls*, p. 32. On this matter Gordon's statement can be accepted, because some of his contemporaries made extracts from the will.

Many of Gordon's other statements are quite untrustworthy. His statement that S. Dubthac was Gilbert's "preceptor" was a gross anachronism. He has done less than justice to the Mackays; but he is useful, because he direct attention to forgotten documents.

<sup>3</sup> An attempt to mollify local feeling. Although Finbar's Church still stood close by the new church, Gilbert was to a certain extent displacing Finbar's name.